

THE QUILT THIS NORTHERN CITY

*It was the snow, profuse, gratuitous, equalizing, theatrically transformative, that seemed most to guarantee the totality and symbolic evenness of this pure, signifying space*¹

Thom stays at my house the night before I leave for New York City this time because I ask him to—I say, *I want you to be the last thing I see before I leave*. We’ve been doing this a lot recently, hanging out for extended periods of time. He has been gone for a while and returned to the bay area from the city recently to live in the Berkeley hills. He bikes down and we smoke and eat and walk around. The last place he was before he was here was there in “the city”. He talks about it like a lot of little squares, tells me to get to Williamsburg from Prospect Park I’ll need to take a train to Manhattan, that this train is like a loop threading the two places together. Thom is big like the sun. In the morning, we collect sandwiches from the little cafe on my block. We sit outside speaking too loudly to each other, then walk back to smoke before he leaves. In the sudden shock of aloneness that follows Thom’s departure I run myself through some cleaning. It’s either “busy giddy minds” or “the devil finds work.” Eventually I decide to leave instead of fussing. I take the train to eat the time and save some money. After getting lost in the airport, struggling through security, and a brief but filling meal, I am airborne—high and quiet.

On the plane, a man spills his iced coffee onto my bag. He’s been balancing it on a half folded tray table which he kept illicitly not-upright for the duration of the flight. He knocked the coffee over with a careless gesture, apologized, and cleaned without removing his headphones or waiting for a response. He would move to the aisle seat just as we got our first food service to give us some space to hold things. He gestured after he moved and dropped his little sandwich into the seat between us. This time he smiled. Both our tray tables were down.

Ariel and Oliver, then Mimi², come to get me in their silver Cube from JFK late into the evening. By then, a full day of traveling done, I am starving and exhausted, a little gross. I hate traveling, or at least I love to hate it. Cramped and always extremely stoned I am normally unsleeping in the middle of two relatively comfortably seated adults for the duration of whatever flights I take. I’m cheap, and anyway broke, plus I do some of my best thinking when I’m kept awake. Every time I go to New York, which rarely happens, I don’t sleep a wink. Or, more accurately, I don’t sleep until I pass out and then I am

¹ Eve Sedgwick, “Interlude, Pedagogic” from *Touching, Feeling*

² On the last morning I stay with them, after a long brunch and another walk through Prospect Park, we return bubbly and tired to Ariel and Oliver’s apartment to find a package with the first of his many testosterone injections has arrived. While we stand around, telling stories and laughing, Oliver preps himself and organizes all the medical equipment. In an almost imperceptible moment he slips away to take the first injection, then returns. “You’ll only be doing that while I’m in therapy,” Ariel says again. She is terrified of needles.

hurled back into wakefulness to do it all over again. There is a well documented force to New York City. My naive figure for it on this trip is the sound of the train under my room at Ariel's moving out and away in the darkness like something leaving the body or circulating within it. Not exactly blood but the sound of it as force. The sort of sound a tarantula might make. I write this image in my journal.

Ariel's place is in Prospect Lefferts Gardens, a sort of walk up in a strange alley which they pay astronomical amounts of their personal money to inhabit. Ariel is the best friend of one of my best friends from middle school, a talented artist who works as an architect, and has lived one of the most brutal lives imaginable. Ariel, in her own words, is angry. But I would say more driven to ferocity. She is on the run from the place she's from: Goshen, Indiana.³ I can say this with certainty:

Once, out driving drunk and stoned, Ariel's brother, Ryan, hit and killed the horse driving the carriage of one amish-type innocent in the area. He was not incarcerated, was in fact only slightly detained. Ryan has a confederate flag tattooed on his right arm in the middle of a skull, the flag born out of the skull's forehead like a racist's Athena, and just as tragically symbolic. Ariel's other brother is autistic. Ariel always describes them both with incredible frankness and warmth.

On our drive from the airport she tells me she wants to write a book about escaping this place, her love for some of the people in it, and about her father, without mentioning why he's been in jail these 14 years.⁴ And I tell her her therapist has good instincts, that I find writing about what confuses or hurts me to be the best way rid of it. She explains she wants to maybe find one event, one day or a trip, that she can have her mother and grandmother and siblings speak about. She wants to hear and record their versions of the story, then write her own. A chorus, I offer. But that's not quite it. Ariel is trying to be fair to a field of delusions. She is searching out a figure for self-deception and the repression amassed by violence, especially when it crosses itself or curses itself with love. I suggest maybe it is something like a ragged tapestry, always myself on the hunt for a figure. *Picture-thinking*. Oliver nods and watches. He taps his thumbs on the steering wheel in time to the music. He is a quiet one and very good with his hands. When asked about the prospect of a book he shrugs encouragingly. Through the wet on the windshield the city is smears of light.

The next day it is Thursday and Oliver and Ariel have work. I eat at Tom's Diner (since 1936) and catch the train by the Brooklyn Museum. I go to see Emily Bode's tailoring

³ (Look it up!)

⁴ She makes a joke about telling people to "do the math."

shop first on the lower east side, where I am snubbed by a few youngish sale's people who are busy playing favorites with someone who is more convincingly pretending to intend to buy something. These strangers are all laying it on thick. I adore retail environments, but the baldness of the transaction can sometimes blunt the pleasure of experiencing beautiful objects in their natural habitat—free of obvious and eventual ownership, loosed from the body and hanging on a wall that was made for them. After trying on some one-of-a-kind quilted pants and a t-shirt with a camel stitched into it that doesn't fit me I leave the shop, vaguely disappointed and giddy. That the clothes don't fit is a relief as it gives me a more legitimate reason to have come all this way, to this specific store, just to try on some stuff and leave abruptly, purchasing nothing. So much of a good boutique experience is hiding your intent, showing up just to play. And I am something for a fashion tourist.

Now, stranded on the lower east side, I go to the New Museum where there is an exhibit of Faith Ringgold's work. I don't go to be moved but to kill time. Before entering this museum I have no earthly idea who Faith Ringgold is. I don't check the current exhibitions when I buy my ticket. I lean on a park bench in open snowfall by a tennis court two people are using for recreational exercise involving a kettle bell, a lot of chanting, and some funny looking colored straps. They are distractingly attractive but somehow insulated, unattainable—the green-blue mesh of the tennis court fence playing tricks with their bodies, and the snow. I remove a glove to buy my ticket on my phone. Before I enter any place like The New Museum I try to be as empty and well fed as possible. The Ringgold exhibit, I don't understand upon entering, spans many floors, and so I accidentally take the stairs around it, entering into a random room of brightly colored posters. Coming accidentally into the middle, I encounter first Ringgold's more immediately political art.

I don't like what I see so I settle in for boredom, wasting time indoors and staying warm. Art exhibits of whatever real value can be like this for me sometimes—totally unmoving—and I try to be ok with that. When I get like this I feel it like a concrete mask weighing my head down and making everything grey and dense. It's frustrating. But then, if I'm lucky, noticing comes with a chisel. It occurs to me that Ringgold reproduces her name over and over again, cutting her inherited identity with political slogans—blending the art of typography, the materials for protest, and something like autobiography into what are even still undoubtably “images”, patterns even. I start to feel my way into the world of Ringgold's work in the next room where quilts expand the color schemes of the posters into auditoriums for figuration with prosceniums for a scrawled, interconnected narrative. It is this instant I realize I am seeing things out of order. To encounter these quilts suddenly and somewhat misplaced is a shock. Their scale makes the room dense, reverential, and more than that there is for me a nagging thought—that Emily Bode is a designer of quilted objects, jackets and hats, some equally one of a kind. Her shop is tucked

into a side street just a few blocks from this strange silver building, cramped and warm and ungodly expensive.

The combination of Ringgold's exhibit and Bode's clothes triggers a nostalgia for my lost family, the baby quilt my great grandmother made for my brother which is strewn, even in that moment from New York I can see it, covered in adorable tigers stuffed through flowers, the stamens of "tiger lilies", over my couch in Oakland. (In a photo on my phone Thom is seated in the morning light next to it, he is saying something funny or laughing at it. Granny Plot made this quilt, my mother's mother's mother. We only met once. There's a picture of that too.) But Bode's clothes themselves function as fashion through their abstraction from a scene like this, they are meant to be worn, to be moved in. They are slightly surreal. Their presence is provocative, clownish even, in the flat grays and reds of the city. To enter Bode's shop is to enter another world of value, a scene for the juxtaposition of homespun textiles and high fashion tailoring. And just by chance, the same day I see and try on her work, I have wandered here, to an exhibition made principally of quilts written over and covered in paint, leveraging a counter history, the subject of which is, at least in part, the labor of black quilters. A counter history that, in its elegant propositioning, demands the inclusion of black making and imagination into the broader field of modern art, and in Ringgold's case, the history of New York City itself.

On the top floor of the exhibition, in a room that is just several large quilts from a single series, Ringgold places herself in the apartment of Gertrude Stein and repaints Van Gough's sunflowers as a field *behind* a group of black quilters. This connection—between Bode and Ringgold, my great grandmother and Thom—made by just a bit of walking, by chance, becomes something of a trap. The exhibition becomes totally engrossing. I find myself seated on the ground in front of several of Ringgold's works which I gather other people find obnoxious if endearing. Perhaps they just see me as a child or some pretentious wannabe painter. I don't mind. When two older white ladies smile at me I know I have made a terrible fool of myself. On the floor below, I find a triptych of massive painting-quilts depicting nude female figures (Ringgold's mother, who sewed the quilts, and her grandmother, and of course Ringgold herself) hung between sets of two smaller pieces, printed with quotes from historically registered black women. I get to the third of the smaller quilts on the far end of the tight, dark passage before I have to sit again for a second and catch my breath. For whatever reason I realize I'm crying stupidly and silently. In the moment I touch my face to check if the tears are real the docent sees me. He just nods. I love New York.

Out of things to do afterwards I walk around for hours thinking about how much the aforementioned juxtaposition irks me. It's odd. The things that bother me to thought seem to arrive at random with an intensity that closes the world a little. This is the feeling of a question forming. I wander for over an hour. Around me lightly in the wind it snows a dusting.

I meet Ariel and Oliver for dinner at a pink-lit restaurant in Williamsburg after walking the bridge in the blustering cold, speaking to my parents. I tell my father that people really do wear all black in the city but it doesn't really look like anything to see them and he asks if the sirens in

the background are on his end or mine. I tell him it's New York. I tell my mom how excited-slash-terrified I am to meet the director of David Zwirner's gallery the next morning who is literally named after a god (Thor). She just laughs and tells me to focus on what I came for: art and friendship. A classic tagline: Be Yourself. When I rock up to Monarch restaurant, I'm still talking to my mom and Ariel and Oliver wave to me and I have to hang up and hug them in a hurry. Ariel says there's something we're celebrating and Oliver holds up his hands. He shakes his head. He says he has just gotten off the phone with a doctor and decided to start T injections as soon as possible. That he will no longer be Mimi but Oliver, at least for now. Which, Ariel says, means we will be trying out he/him pronouns too tonight. The change in name, I am warned, might be provisional. But the change of address, Oliver smiles to say it, is definite. It's a clear relief.

The news is cause for toasts and fancy dumplings, "modern dim sum", a long conversation involving family and their wedding, Ariel's book. Oliver recedes into a pleasant smile for most of the evening and when Ariel gets up to go to the bathroom I lean over to him and ask if he's alright. He had shared some pretty serious shit about himself and his family, and though he appeared calm I needed to be assured Ariel and I's excited, loud, and rapid narrations hadn't crowded him out of his own night. His smile deepened into a nod. His new hair cut, a sort of mullet, let a tiny white-blonde rat tail sneak over his shoulder. He felt for it and pushed it back. He was fine, he assured me, even inviting Ariel to corroborate his peaceful silences upon her return to the table. They are in love so her witness rings true. But I notice he speaks more after that, describing a project someone has assigned him at the fabrication studio where he works, or his new system for avoiding frantic hours on the subway. The joy in his excitable stories holds a special place in my image of their happiness. On our walk home through the park, Ariel snaps him back into our conversation only to find he'd been laughing at the birds.

The next morning I run late to David Zwirner's gallery in Chelsea. The rain and the sound of the subway had glued me to the bed. A little soaked and humiliated from a mistaken subway transfer, I spill into the Prêt on Union Square with just 25 mins to eat and find my way to 10th ave and 20 something. It is my nightmare to be late, and it will be Thor's nightmare to meet me when I'm hungry. I'm hypoglycemic or, simply, a notorious dickhead when not properly fed. I choke down a sandwich and almost break my ankle all but running toward the gallery. I stay across the street for a second when I get there to catch my breath. I'm nervous so this won't really be enough, but it helps me to stop sweating at least. It is positively freezing outside, the sky sealed over with grey, like a flat florescent office light above me. The gallery too is grey and flat and square. White and steel and glass and orange light and graying brick slice each other in tall, interlocked recesses. Small and in the corner by the door—itsself the only perceptible relief for ingress, scarcely noticeable save an invitingly elegant handle protruding from what otherwise appears to be a large window with a raised white sheer revealing a desk—is the name of the gallery's owner in sans serif, but properly capitalized. I am still out of breath when I get inside, awkward and unchic in my brother's bright red Arc'teryx coat. I am wet and so is my umbrella. The attendants speak immediately and I don't understand a word they say.

“I’m here to meet... Thor?” I say, fumbling in the absurdity of asking after a myth. I’m afraid I’ve come across as impatient. Then suddenly I am rueful at this, knowing that my constant confusion and anxiety tend to be read as a sort of curt yet affable intensity. I smile and shake the water out of my hair like I’ve just arrived at an intimate friend’s home or like some kind of animal. The attendants look at me like I have three heads. There is a thin moment of strained stillness. Then they quickly correct me on my pronunciation. It is spelled Thor but pronounced Tor. One of them asks my name, then the other does. They both say it correctly the first time. Quicker still, they ascertain from me why I have come and someone gets on the phone. And before I can even really understand what’s happened they ask me to come around the desk. I say,

“I don’t know what that means,” and one of them kindly directs me to the phone. They tell me Thor wants to talk to me so I take it. My hand is wet.

“Yo” I say, “What’s up?”

They all laugh. Thor laughs too. He is clearly in a car. He explains why he is late, says something about a studio visit and that he is sorry he wasn’t there to meet me. I tell him I have literally nothing to do but meet him and look at art, so that’s like totally whatever. He says in that case I should check out their other gallery around the block and by the time I’ve done that he’ll be there. So I give back the damp receiver and one of the gallery assistants, who is meeting a friend that direction for coffee, takes me to the other space. I am not prepared for what I find there. She had described it as “sculptural”.

This other exhibition is simply six rooms and the first you can see fully from the door: A black and yellow and blue patterned floor in a white cube with maybe 20 foot ceilings lit from above by a large window. What you cannot see until entering it is that on a small floating steel shelf in the far right corner sits a tiny silver figure, slouched. This little feller scares the shit out of me. My surprise catches the eye of the docent. He chuckles. The next room is four identical seeming sized-to-life sculptures of one man on another man’s back, all in a circle facing each other. It is unclear if are they screaming or laughing. The one on top brandishes a knife. In the next room, reddish sandstone columns pass through the wall closest to me, identically and in a line, two by two, into the far one. Hidden at first from view but easily discoverable is another waist-high bronze figure staring into the last room. As I am about to cross into it something seems to crash. I jump. The docent asks aloud,

“Man, what the fuck was that?”

I jump again at his voice. I tell him I heard it too, assure him he isn’t crazy. In the moment of fully rendered listening that passes between us I hear the tiny machines whirring in the final room on this floor. Turning to enter it I find another massive room—maybe 20ft by 30ft—in which three silver looking sculptures hang from the ceiling. One is hanging by the ankle, the other two grip braided ropes with their teeth. The two held up by their teeth rotate slowly, powered by tiny engines on the ceiling. The postures of the men are balletic, their automatic

movement terrifying. No one directs me to the second floor, I go simply in search of a bathroom. Upstairs the rooms continue to unfold in strangeness until I am crouched, finally, in a darkened corner in front of two tiny men roughly sculpted in stone. They are sitting in a pool of light on a far wall. A recording of a man complaining plays on a short loop from a hidden speaker and I stay and stare as long as I can stand it. It's then I ask after the bathroom and am told, of course, there isn't one.

When I get back to the original gallery, they are only a block apart, I am greeted with more familiarity by the assistants—overly warm, even a little ingratiating. The obvious shift in their orientation toward me affirms every stereotype I have ever heard about New Yorkers and people “in the art world.” It's a little sad to me in the moment, I wonder if they're even aware of they've done it.⁵ This is typical for me across any number of social contexts—upon first introduction to people of a certain stripe there seems to be an immediate, unthinking dismissal of me. I am far too small, too racially ambiguous, and too obviously queer to be of much import to anyone, especially anyone who is already ensconced in their own little world of clout and intrigue. I don't mind this really, it is often just as useful as inconvenient to be written off immediately. To appear so easily invisible makes it easier to render myself to new people how I'd like to be seen. Sometimes it is proper to demure and keep back, waiting to be seen and, as a “charity”, called in, only for the room to discover they have passed over a spot of intensity without cause. And other times, in a classroom on the first day of the semester for example, it makes more sense to approach a new crowd of nonbelievers with a playful show of force. Honesty has many guises.

For my next trick, I pretend to be looking at a museum catalog to kill the moment of whispered apprehension and cautious approach which this Thor person will have, no doubt, to put on for his colleagues. I face the wall in front of the desk, where a tasteful selection of relevant art books is the only adornment. Because this exhibition is about the career of the late Toni Morrison, several of her novel's appear here. What draws my attention, however, is a reprint of her seminal “Black Book”, a text I have only read about but never seen. Like *The Harlem Book of the Dead* or *The New Negro Anthology*, *The Black Book* is a collection made from several pictorial and textural artifacts of the time between emancipation and civil rights, 1865-1964. But unlike these other two books, *The Black Book* moves largely without contextualization and is produced post facto. It is, as it were, a quilting. When I hear the person who must be Thor shuffling and whispering behind me, I am looking at an ad for soap. A literally black little girl beams up at me. Around her, early 20th century ad fonts spell out a promise to make me clean. Thor sort of taps me on the shoulder and sort of turns me around. We shake hands.

After Thor's tour we sit in his office which, going in and taking a seat, I cannot believe I am about to do: just sit there in the office of a gallery in Chelsea, speaking to one of the directors

⁵ Later in the evening when, after the “activation” of an installation at The Kitchen, oddly right across the street from DZ's, I meet a curator from the Whitney and her friend who works at a competing Chelsea gallery, I am affirmed in my assumption that these assistants do, in fact, know exactly what they're doing. This endears me toward them greatly. I think again, sweating and speaking to them under pink light, “I love New York.”

there, who earlier had poured me coffee from a large cardboard box he'd pulled from an exquisitely understated fridge in a positively sterile kitchen kept quietly behind an almost invisible door marked "Private". So many things at a gallery are off-limits. The kitchen is just a few oranges in a bowl and some things for making coffee, all beautifully simple and contained on a stone counter. Thor's first question, after our initial settling of the questions of my age, year in school⁶, and field of study, plus my connection to the gallery, arose in the hall and was rattled off with just as casual an intensity. Thor walking in front of me, to lead me without directing me, turned and asked whether I preferred hot coffee or iced. Something in his orientation toward me shifted, just a slip. This was a loaded question. The obvious answer was, *Iced*.

The glasses Thor pulled from the cabinets were arranged, before our slight disturbance, in neat rows—intersecting planes of curved, thin, pristinely identical glass. He turned to me then, pouring without looking, another question screwing up his face.

"Do you want a bent straw or straight?" The straws are metal and many in the drawer. He holds both up and looks at me. He will take the one I choose against.

Why we all insist on playing games like this is fascinating but beyond me. I am not by any means a very direct person, don't mistake me, but something about these sort of playful, probing questions always strikes me as hammy and unnecessarily cloying. Of course, he lines them up and I knock them down. They make an invitation. I respond in turn, look confusedly at him: I move through my life, I should think, as if it goes without saying I would only accept a bent straw in my iced coffee. This is how I take up my end of this social bargain. Showing up is half the battle with new people. Hugely intelligent in their own worlds, each of them comes with an idiom of shared or sharable gestures. These ones are disarming, meant to put me at ease. Thor can probably tell how nervous I am. I have never been good at hiding fear in my face, and I always visibly sweat. But making this sort of subliminal linguistic pact or truce that will allow us to tease and test each other, mildly and openly, does its work. I accept the coffee, commanding my hands to hold heat and stop trembling. He smiles. They do stop. This is charm—an open invitation for an immediate presumption of intimacy, a wager.

Very few people, I have found, can be charming in the way people who's job it is to sell expensive things are charming. This is why very often I find myself trying on clothes at shops well beyond my means, with sales people who are deeply encouraging and endearing. They simply swoop in to help you imagine yourself in the clothes. It is as if all of the best qualities of a desiccated aristocracy find a revival among the class of people who can unironically refer to themselves as "culture workers" by working in reality as salesmen. The art dealer, then, is something of a Janus figure.

⁶ He thought I was an undergrad and asked about my major. I informed him, politely but sternly, that I haven't been an undergraduate since 2016. He blamed his misapprehension of me on my mask. *But of course*.

Any art they sell at the gallery, Thor tells me, they are free to hang in their office. Above his bookshelves is a photograph of the grave Gertrude Stein shares with Alice B. Toklas. The books below resemble those for sale too, glossy and large. I had left my things atop this low shelf before our tour. They disrupt the low laying lines of the bookshelves with their lived-in disorder. There is nothing else in his office—a Mac on a desk, an art book on a low table, his Rimowa carry-on suitcase. We talk about how the sterility of this space and the gallery around it must be oppressive but, then again, retains some of that modernist edge that opens them into a space for encounter with the uncanny or unnatural. Thor is hanging on between two worlds—one that makes art and one that buys it—but he sees something more complex, more mingled. He tells me that when he was being “radicalized” by his college experience studying art history, he found the simple human fact of Art most fascinating. He tells me to him it is and has always been just a group of people sort of hanging out. Thor is, of course, a salesman in disguise, several paintings in the gallery surrounding him are commissions to be “placed.” We talk about this too. And I say something about how he must feel seeing to the sale of some America’s greatest living artists.

“You’re, like, the invisible hand!” I say at one point. He sort of shakes his head. I’m missing it.

Thor would never say this about himself. He would say he works hard to place David’s artists’ works and cultivate burgeoning collectors. He would say he doesn’t really think about his role as that of a mediator. He is just one among many who make their lives through art. However, to my mind, what rescues Thor’s position from being more or less analogs with a Bently dealer or a brick and mortar boutique is his more or less direct mediating role between artist and buyer, a position of intercession that gives Thor a window into, and even a seat in, a world run equally by artists and millionaires.

As we talk and talk excitedly, I ask him about my trouble with the quilts, describe myself scoffing at the wall text’s flattening of black life and labor, then tell him about how I cried in front of one of the works and likely freaked out a security guard. This is funny. I tell him, oddly seriously perhaps, that I find the fact that the city can hold both the appropriation of labor into “one-of-a-kind” fashions dreamt up by white people and the massive exhibit on an elaboration of that very form of labor into untouchable, fictional and autobiographical quilts done by a black person just a few blocks south, makes me feel like a conspiracy theorist. I say I don’t understand why I can’t understand how I am meant to feel about the quotidian labor of quilt making becoming ensconced behind a dueling set of prohibitive institutions: one marred by its abstraction away from use with the intent to direct a viewer’s attention slantwise back toward life, the other barred from the daily life of most normal people by an exorbitant price tag and the requirement of special tailoring, and both a flagrant imitation of the quilt my great grand mother had made, there still folded and a little ragged on my couch in California. Something in this, I tried to say, wasn’t adding up. And who wants to walk around in a quilt anyway in this city, I added exasperated, everyone I see is in all black! Thor looked serious for a second, then just as suddenly relaxed. He’d found the answer.

“Well,” he said smiling, anticipating my response, “you can’t afford the Ringgold quilts either.”

When it is time to stand up so Thor can get back to work, I suggest jokingly he ask a friend of his for a pair of their company's bright green boots, but he tells me he has never felt comfortable asking people for anything. He leaves his office that day to fly to Milan. It is fashion week.

I am marooned in the gallery again after, having been given a hug and shown to a bathroom—another invisible door I discover in private desperation. The time I spend in the gallery alone is equally informative. There are objects strewn about on the floor which only gain in spiritual intelligence as I am let alone to wander amongst them without a guide. Thor had told me many details about the curation and installation of the pieces in the four rooms, but somehow the less of seeing them in relative silence was just a revelatory, if slightly less “fun”. The silence left room for devotion to creep in. The newness of the commissioned works—by Kerry James Marshall and Julie Mehretu, two of my favorite painters —was equalled by the raggedness of the objects which had seemingly drifted in to obscure any easy path through the room, save a full circuit. A doll, several orderly pairs of old shoes, an antique record player broken open. As my eyes drifted again from painting to sculpture to piece of archival material, I could feel the intricate weave—not only of a life but of the love of a life, of a body of work and its significance as a presence in the present—that had brought these particular things together in this particular way. The intimacy left open for the room by the curator's decision to include their own objects in the exhibition, letting them crowd the floor as if grown from it in challenge to the masterful intimations of the “proper” art, was overwhelming. And the accrued force of the many interlocking juxtapositions—between letter and glyph, sculpture and shoe, commission and communication—made me stutter my way through my re-see. In a room with a park bench facing a portrait of the late Morrison I stopped for fifteen minutes. Sat in silence on a bench whose installation was a reminder to the underground railroad⁷ I asked the figure on the wall what I was meant to do now? With all this. How could I pass again through the final room of the show, where all that waited to greet me was, from right, to left and center: A precariously balanced sculpture of a carriage being pulled uphill by a tractor, an eerie bird cage shrouded in black cloth underneath which a mutilated doll is hanged as if a perched bird, and between them the Mehretu: a massive, murky, black-gold painting that seems to be a deconstructed American flag, shredded to ribbons in a muddy river rich in precious metals, perhaps gold, that tempt the viewer to drowning. There was so little closure here, so much loss....

When it finally released me the day was half over. I had been in one of David Zwirner's galleries—a total of maybe 10 rooms—from 10:30am until nearly 3pm. I was swooning with hunger, having forgot how little I'd eaten. I wandered up to Hudson Yard and shivered in the startling array of extremely modern architectures—curvilinear windows and fractured forms shouted down on me as the crowd on the High Line pushed in around. Eventually I ate and even saw other galleries, one of which was filled with horrifically stupid art by Damien Hirst, whom I loathe. Ludicrously expensive-looking marble sculptures of Disney characters made to look like

⁷ A project of the later Morrison was setting up these benches to mark stops along the way to Freedom. It is unclear whether or not the one I am sitting on is a reproduction or an abduction.

they were unearthed from the bottom of the ocean, covered with barnacles, pink and ash marble spores, littered the room at a Gagosian like tombstones at a yard sale. These were surrounded by several identical looking but differently underpainted canvases with likely thousands of impasto dots covering their negligible difference in aleatory repetition, having been clearly made with the same or a very similar paint brush. As I glance through, positively enraged, I imagine Hirst's exhausted studio assistants rolling on ecstasy, crafting three or four of these candy-shop mandalas while they wait for the "marble" to soften enough to cast. The image is amusing. With this, day runs on into night again after much walking and a little more snow. Sheets of ice fall from tall buildings to very little of the appropriate surprise or worry from people on the street. "I love New York." I go into a few stores but eventually just seek different places to sit down. At 6:15pm, I go to get a coffee.

In front of The Kitchen, directly across the street from the gallery where earlier I had met Thor, I meet Jamal and Ra, two dear sort of school friends and colleagues. We embrace and I thank them for being the first black people I've seen all day wearing the Telfar bags I'd been counting all around the city (but that they are many is as God intended!) I go inside and greet more friends and elders and colleagues. The artist we have all gathered to see and celebrate, called Sadie, stands before her iridescent, floating sculpture with her father. I think she is wearing rainbow Manolos—a broach on the toe and a curve in the heel, like the columns of a post-modern bank building, give her away. They are rainbow. Moments after I find a seat she is waving me over with a quiet excitement. She eases off her purse, handing it to her husband, and hugs me. This show of familiarity in a strange black box theater in a foreign city invites me into myself again. Everyone looks as gorgeous as they are trying to look. I realize, attempting to speak coherently to Sadie, I am utterly exhausted. When I'm sitting again, I sink beneath this exhaustion into a position of patient receptivity. This show is the reason I have come to New York, it is work that I am deeply engaged with made with incredible talent by people I care about, and I am determined to afford it what feel like the last shreds of my presence and attention. Sinking literally in my chair then sitting up again I experience this show in pink light like the edge of a beautiful dream. I do not succumb to sleep, but take notes and later, when everyone is up for champagne and congratulations, I draw. I cast my awareness into the hands of the performers and their visions carry me—interview, history, film, music, poetry, and personal essays sit and shift next to each other, making a point that is just beyond articulation. Afterwards, I'm speechless for several minutes. There is no Q&A. Back in Prospect Park, I talk to Ariel and Oliver till long past three in the morning. I do not rouse the next day until noon.

*As soon as persons are posited, the war begins*⁸

⁸ Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?"